

Book Review: A Transatlantic History of the Social Sciences: Robber Barons, the Third Reich and the Invention of Empirical Social Research, by Christian Fleck

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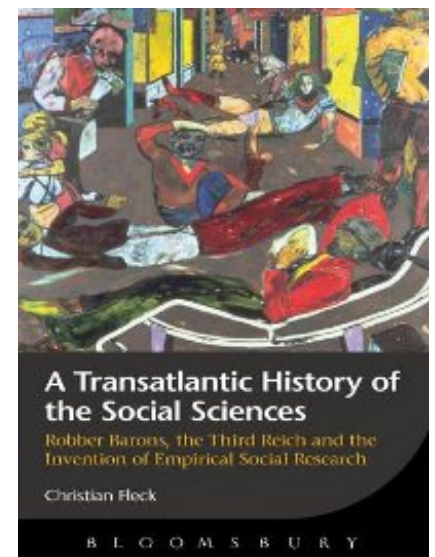
A Transatlantic History of the Social Sciences helps us better understand how and in what way the social sciences came to occupy a central place in universities across Europe and North America. Author Christian Fleck shows that the social sciences were born in order to help make sense of a complex and changing world, yet ultimately their very shape was structured by the very world they sought to explain. Daniel Sage finds the book to be essential reading for anyone interested in the origins of social research.



A Transatlantic History of the Social Sciences: Robber Barons, the Third Reich and the Invention of Empirical Social Research. Christian Fleck. Bloomsbury Academic. 256 pages. February 2011.

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During the twentieth-century, the pace of scientific and scholarly exchange between Europe and North America underwent something of a revolution. Over many decades, increasing numbers of academics made the journey across the Atlantic, with profound consequences for many disciplines. Yet the impact of such exchange in terms of disciplinary development was probably of most importance for the social sciences. In this new English language edition of an acclaimed 2007 study, Christian Fleck – professor of sociology at the University of Graz – meticulously explores how the complex and often troubled story of European-American intellectual relations was instrumental in the development of empirical social science.





At the broadest level, Fleck demonstrates how the consolidation of the social sciences in academic institutions was intimately tied up with wider historical forces. Throughout the book, there is a steady connection made between the ordinary and the extraordinary: what often appear as the more banal features in the development of the social sciences are linked to and contextualised within broader historical phenomena, such as American philanthropy and the rise of Nazism. The main focus for Fleck is on the social scientists of the German-speaking world, many of whom were forced by the rise of Hitler to seek refuge in the US. The lives and careers of some of the most important social scientists – such as Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Paul Lazarsfeld – are explored within this wider context of changing political and economic power.



Fleck devotes the first part of his study to demonstrate the influence of American philanthropists in aiding the growth of the social sciences and their increasing recognition in academic institutions. Wealthy donors, such as Andrew Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller, were instrumental in establishing foundations that supported education and research activities not just in the US, but in

Europe too. With the rise of Nazism in the 1930s, such foundations helped increasing numbers of researchers to travel to the US to continue their research. Their prime focus was in supporting what was then called 'realistic research': or what is known as 'empirical research' today. At first, Fleck shows how American philanthropists had helped establish a mutual relationship between Europe and the US in the exchange of social science research. Yet with Nazism this soon became 'one-way traffic', with many young European researchers – particularly those who were Jewish – being aided to 'escape to the United States'.

In the latter half of the book, Fleck examines a number of case studies that bear light on how German-speaking sociologists came to be influenced by (and influence themselves) the American world of social science. The first of these case studies explores Paul Lazarsfeld's role in the Princeton Radio Research Project, while the second case looks at the publication of *The Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno and colleagues. In both cases Fleck shows how European academics were introduced to American systems of scholarship, such as 'project management' and 'joint collaboration'. The experience was not an entirely straightforward one however, as European sociologists were confronted by an acutely different academic environment, with alternative mechanisms of funding and different expectations of teamwork and empirical rigour.

The impact that such new and different pressures had on European scholars is demonstrated by Fleck in his analysis of the *The Authoritarian Personality* (TAP), first published in 1950 by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson and Sanford. The case of TAP is used by Fleck to demonstrate a number of different pressures. Horkheimer, for example, was particularly preoccupied with securing funding for the project from the American Jewish Committee (AJC), resulting in his appointment as research director of the AJC and accusations that he had become a 'science bureaucrat'. Other issues surrounded the politics and practicalities of scholarly collaboration that was, in the mid-1940s, still a novelty in academic institutions. Particular controversy surrounded the co-authorship of TAP, with Adorno eventually claiming first place in the list of authors despite his much more limited contribution to the study compared to that of his colleagues. The academic difficulties experienced by the members of the Institute for Social Research during the preparation of TAP is illuminating; as Fleck rightly states, by the 1970s a favourable 'legend' had been created about the Institute's 'years of exile' in the US. Beyond the legend, Fleck shows the everyday pressures surrounding the Frankfurt School in terms of funding, collaboration and the need to have 'impact'. It is likely that such pressures are all too familiar to social scientists today.

The method that Fleck employs to explain these stories is called 'collective biography'. This means he explores – with great scrutiny – the trajectories of around 800 sociologists and their respective career paths. To achieve this Fleck bases his account mainly on a deep and broad analysis of archival data: which, he admits himself, is an unusual approach for a sociological study. The effect of this method is to give the study an undoubted rigour, yet there is a sense that the dense description of figures and statistics sometimes detracts from the study's wider analysis and story. This can make Fleck's book undoubtedly difficult at times, with the link between data and context sometimes unclear.

Nevertheless, *A Transatlantic History of the Social Sciences* helps us better understand how and in what way the social sciences came to occupy a central place in universities across Europe and North America. As Fleck shows, the social sciences were born in order to help make sense of a complex and changing world, yet ultimately their very shape was structured by and a product of the very world they sought to explain. Without the rise of two very different social systems – American capitalism and German fascism – it is certain that the social sciences would have developed differently, with alternative centres of intellectual power and different ways of doing research. For historians of the social sciences, or for anyone with an interest in the origins of social research, Fleck's study is essential reading.

Daniel Sage is a PhD student at the University of Stirling. His PhD thesis explores how welfare-to-work reforms have affected the experiences and interactions of benefit claimants with the welfare

system. Additionally, he has academic interests in income inequality and social cohesion, public attitudes towards the welfare state and the politics and philosophy of social policy. He has a BA in History from University College London and an MSc in Social Policy from the LSE. He tweets at [@djsage86](#) and blogs at <http://knowledge-is-porridge.blogspot.com>. [Read more reviews by Daniel.](#)

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